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Visitor Expectations, Satisfactions, and Views Toward Financial Support for Selected New Hampshire Historic Sites

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Abstract

Although the number of visitors to New Hampshire state-owned historic sites has declined during the last 20 years, the results of a survey indicate that most respondents are satisfied with the level of services provided. The majority of visitors indicated that historic sites need not be "self-supporting"; they were willing to pay an entry fee and did not object to donation boxes. Seventy percent indicated that the current \$2.00 entry fee was reasonable.

Introduction

In the 20-year period from 1964 to 1984, the number of visitors recorded at New Hampshire state-owned historic sites declined drastically. Even with incomplete information for 1964 (visitor estimates for only 4 of the 10 sites operated), the number of visitors declined from 27,000 in 1964 to 11,000 in 1983, the latter figure includes four additional historic sites. There were slight increases in 1984 and 1985, but visitation remained far below historic levels.

Of the four historic sites included in this study, only the Franklin Pierce Homestead recorded more visitors in 1984 than in 1964. On the other hand, visitation at the Daniel Webster Birthplace dropped from 10,000 in 1964 to 600 in 1984, and the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion fell from 5,600 to 1,300 over the same period. Attendance figures were not available for the Robert Frost Farm prior to 1983. Such declines during a time when outdoor recreation and tourism

are enjoying increasing popularity concern the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation. It has been suggested that inadequate maintenance is a primary contributing factor to the decline of visitation in many New Hampshire historic sites and state parks (Kitch 1985, Thomas 1985).

The observance of the 50th anniversary of the New Hampshire state parks system in 1985 and other promotional activities have been directed at stimulating renewed interest in historic sites as well as parks and natural areas. During 1985, the number of visitors recorded at the seven state historic sites where attendance records were kept was 13,100. These facilities are preserved in the public trust as part of our national or regional heritage; however, little is known regarding what visitors desire or the satisfaction that they derive from the level and mix of services. The state is vitally interested in obtaining better information on the characteristics of visitors, their expectations, and the value that they place on historic sites.

This is the first phase of a continuing study designed to develop a better understanding of the expectations of visitors to state-owned historic sites and natural areas in New Hampshire. This phase of the study explores the relationship between cost and perceived quality relationships and provides the basis for a more detailed analysis that will follow.

Methodology

The New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation and the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station joined in a cooperative effort to undertake the study. With consultation from the Northeastern Station, the Division of State Parks and Recreation developed and distributed a questionnaire at selected historic sites. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on how well the specific sites met the

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expectations of the visitors, the adequacy of services provided, the appropriateness of alternative revenue sources, the origin of the visitors, and some visitor characteristics.

Budget constraints limited the scope of the study. While the State of New Hampshire owns 10 historic sites and 14 natural areas, only four of the seven sites that provide hosting/guiding services were included in the study: Franklin Pierce Homestead, Daniel Webster Birthplace, Robert Frost Farm, and the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion.

During the period from August 1 to September 10, 1985, the host/hostess at the selected historic sites asked each adult visitor to complete and return a questionnaire. The questionnaires were sent to the Division's headquarters in Concord; and subsequently sent to the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station Laboratory in Burlington, Vermont for tabulation and analysis.

Chi square methods were applied to determine if a significant difference existed between the response of New Hampshire residents and non-residents. With few exceptions, the sample was not of sufficient size to test statistical differences among the historic sites.

Visitor Behavior

A better understanding of visitor behavior relative to the historic sites can provide useful insights in providing appropriate services and effective promotional activities. Measures of the intensity of individual interest such as number of historic sites visited over a designated time period, time spent at the specific site, numbers of visits to that site, and origin of visitors can be considered relative to their influence on demand for the kinds of services that are provided.

More than 70 percent of the 195 respondents to the questionnaire were nonresidents of New Hampshire. While visitors resided in states as distant as Alaska and Hawaii, over three-quarters resided permanently in northeastern states, and 57 percent were from the New England region.

Differences between residents and non-residents of New Hampshire in how they happened to visit specific sites were statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Nearly 35 percent of nonresidents indicated that they were influenced by promotional activities such as signs, brochures, and maps compared to about 22 percent of the residents. On the other hand, over 37 percent of nonresidents visited by chance occurrence compared to only 13 percent of the residents. Planned visits occurred proportionately more frequently among residents than nonresidents.

While it is not surprising that residents were aware of the historic site that they were visiting for a longer period of time than nonresidents, it is noteworthy that 84 percent of nonresidents and 55 percent of residents were aware of the site for a year or less. In fact, 69 percent of the nonresidents and 39 percent of the residents were aware of the historic site for 1 week or less. The difference in length of time of awareness between residents and nonresidents was statistically significant as the 0.01 level.

A majority of the respondents (nearly 57 percent) spent an hour to an hour and a half at the historic site that they were visiting (Table 1). However, 37 percent spent less than an hour, whereas relatively few remained 2 hours or longer. No statistically significant differences between residents and nonresidents were found at the 0.05 level.

For an overwhelming majority of the respondents, this was the first visit to that specific historic site. Of the 193 submitting usable responses, 178 (91.3 percent) indicated that it was their first visit. At the 0.05 level, no significant difference was found among the four historic sites included in the study or between residents and nonresidents.

When asked how many other historic sites they had visited in the past year, most of the respondents indicated a general interest for such areas. In fact, over 21 percent had visited 10 or more historic sites in the past year. Thirty-five percent visited one to three other sites; 27 percent visited 4 to 10 other historic sites. Less than 17 percent of the respondents had visited no other historic sites in the past year. Responses from nonresidents and residents were not significantly different at the 0.05 level.

Table 1.—Time spent by visitors at selected New Hampshire historic sites.

Time spent	Number of respondents	Percent of total
One-half hour or less	45	23.1
Over one-half hour but less than an hour	28	14.4
One hour	74	37.9
Over one hour to one-and-a-half hour	37	19.0
Two hours or more	11	5.6
Total	195	100.0

Perceived Quality of Historic Sites

A primary consideration in the management of publicly owned areas such as historic sites is their perceived quality by the users. In general, the historic sites selected for this study were viewed quite favorably by the visitors who completed questionnaires. However, it should be emphasized that the sample included only those who actually visited one or more of the selected historic sites during a specific time period and, thus, omitted those who were aware of the site's existence and possibly considered visiting it, but decided otherwise. The latter group might have decidedly different perceptions than those who chose to visit any of the historic sites included in the study.

In terms of the respondents' perceptions after visiting as compared to their prior expectations, the New Hampshire historic sites were very favorably viewed. Of all the respondents, 98 percent indicated that the historic site that they had visited either generally met or exceeded their expectations (Table 2). The preponderance of favorable response to this question carried through both residents and nonresidents and with each of the four historic sites included in the study. No statistically significant difference between residents and nonresidents was found at the 0.05 level.

When asked if they would like to visit the historic site again, both residents (77 percent) and nonresidents (57 percent) responded positively. Most of the remainder were undecided although 11 percent of nonresidents and 2 percent of the residents indicated that they would not like to visit the specific historic site again. These differences were statistically significant at the 0.05 level. While a majority of the respondents indicated that they would like to visit the site again, and another large number were unde-

Table 2.—Comparison of visitors' perception to expectations of selected New Hampshire historic sites.

Rank	Number of respondents	Percent of total
Generally fell short of expectations	4	2.1
Generally met expectations	75	39.1
Generally exceeded expectations	113	58.9
Total	192	100.0

cided, as previously noted, there were relatively few repeat visitors during the period of time in which this survey was completed.

The selected New Hampshire historic sites compared quite favorably to others that had been visited by the respondents; that is, over half of both residents and nonresidents indicated that the historic site that they had visited was either "one of the best" or "better than most" (Table 3). Only 3 of the 170 respondents felt that the historic site that they had visited was "one of the poorest." The chi-square test indicated a significant difference between residents and nonresidents at the 0.05 level. Thirty-five percent of the residents rated the specific site that they were visiting "one of the best" as compared to 14 percent of the nonresidents.

Table 3.—Rank of selected New Hampshire sites compared to other historic sites visited, by resident and nonresident

Rank	Resident		Nonresident	
	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total
One of the best	13	35.0	18	13.8
Better than most	10	25.0	48	36.9
About average	16	40.0	61	46.9
One of poorest	—	00.0	3	2.3
Total	40	100.0	130	100.0

When asked which features of the site were of most interest, visitors gave a wide variety of responses that were categorized in order to interpret them (Table 4). Most frequently mentioned were the buildings, the interior, and historical significance; each of these categories was mentioned by 39 respondents. The services provided were mentioned by 30 visitors. Finally, the exterior setting was cited as the most interesting feature by 21 respondents.

Table 4.—Features of selected historic sites that were of most interest to visitors

Feature of most interest	All Respondents	
	Number	Percent of total
Exterior setting		
Entire site	7	4.2
Location (view and grounds)	14	8.3
	21	12.5
Buildings		
Structural features	21	12.5
Construction and Architecture	18	10.7
	39	23.2
Interior		
Interior decoration	8	4.8
Furniture and fixtures	20	11.9
Rooms	11	6.5
	39	23.2
Historical significance		
History of site and/or inhabitants	27	16.1
Artifacts and historical documents	11	6.5
Still used by Governor (Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion)	1	0.6
	39	23.2
Services provided		
Guides	7	4.2
Audio-visual displays	23	13.7
	30	17.9
Total	168	100.0

The hosting/guiding services provided at the historic sites included in the study were viewed quite favorably by the visitors with 99 percent indicating that these services were either adequate or more than adequate. Furthermore, 61 percent felt that the hosting/guiding services were more than adequate. A higher proportion of nonresidents found these services “more than adequate,” and this difference was statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Only two respondents, both residents, indicated that the hosting/guiding services were inadequate.

Visitors were also given the opportunity to comment on the hosting/guiding services provided. In all, 45 individuals chose to respond with the most frequent comments being informative (17), positive personality (10), and good tour (8).

When asked what additional services/facilities that the visitor would like to see at the specific historic sites, the results were generally inconclusive because of the high rate of non-response and a wide range of answers. The most frequent response was that more period furnishings were needed; 12 individuals stated this, 9 of whom were visitors at the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion.

Financial Support

Thus far, only the expectations and satisfaction related to visiting selected New Hampshire historic sites have been examined. Providing adequate services is certainly a major concern for public managers, but there is also the matter of financing such activities. Under the present system, visitors pay entry fees that are not earmarked for use at the site where collected or even for the state park system. Revenues collected through entry fees go into the general fund, and monies are allocated from the general fund to operate state parks and historic sites. Obviously, this survey includes only the views of users toward financing historic sites, thus excluding those who contribute through other revenue generating measures. Nevertheless, visitors have familiarity with the areas in question and can provide useful insights relative to appropriate funding sources.

Visitors to the four selected New Hampshire historic sites were asked whether such areas should be self-supporting (Table 5). A majority of the respondents (57.3 percent) indicated that the historic sites need not be self-supporting. Just under 20 percent of the respondents indicated that the sites should be self-supporting, while 23 percent were undecided. No statistically significant differences in responses at the 0.05 level were found between residents and nonresidents.

Table 5.—Views of visitors to selected New Hampshire historic sites regarding whether such sites should be self-supporting.

Visitors' views on having sites self-supporting	Number of respondents	Percent of total
Yes	36	19.5
No	106	57.3
Undecided	43	23.2
Total	185	100.0

One possible source of funding to support historic sites is the use of donation boxes. When asked if donation boxes would be appropriate at historic sites, over 60 percent answered affirmatively as compared to 26 percent who indicated that they were inappropriate. Thirteen percent were undecided on the issue. Once again, no significant differences in the responses related to residence were found at the 0.05 level.

With some exceptions, visitors of state-owned historic sites in New Hampshire are charged entry fees. When asked whether or not such fees were appropriate, an overwhelming 82 percent responded that they were (Table 6). Less than 7 percent of the total respondents indicated that entry fees should not be charged. While proportionately fewer residents favored entry fees, the difference was not significant at the 0.05 level.

The visitors were also asked a structured question as to who should pay the entry fees. Of those providing usable responses, 97 (60.6 percent) indicated that adults only should pay. However, 63 (39.4 percent) were in favor of everyone paying. Two other categories of potential users, "organized school groups" and "people who are disadvantaged" did not receive a single response that indicated they should pay. However, these two categories would obviously fall within the "everyone" category, so the lack of response may be the result of poor structuring of the questionnaire. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that no one

Table 6.—Views of visitors regarding the use of entry fees to pay for staffing and maintenance at selected New Hampshire historic sites.

Visitors' view on whether a fee should be charged	Number of respondents	Percent of total
Yes	159	82.4
No	13	6.7
Undecided	21	10.9
Total	193	100.0

marked either of these categories. Here again, no significant difference between residents and nonresidents was found at the 0.05 level.

The visitors were also asked an open-ended question regarding what would be a reasonable entry fee. The response ranged from \$1.50 to \$5.00, but 83 respondents (69.6 percent) indicated \$2.00, the regular fee (Table 7).

Table 7.—Reasonable entry fees to visit selected New Hampshire historic sites as indicated by respondents.

Entry Fee ¹	Number of respondents	Percent of Total	Cumulative number of respondents	Cumulative percent of total
\$1.50	12	11.8	12	11.8
\$2.00	71	69.6	83	81.4
\$2.50	5	4.9	88	86.3
\$3.00	8	7.8	96	94.1
\$3.50 or more	6	6.0	102	100.0

¹ Another 42 respondents indicated that the current fee was a reasonable fee, but this causes some difficulty in interpretation. Normally, the entry fee for adults is \$2.00, but as part of the promotions accompanying the 50th anniversary of New Hampshire state parks, a person could purchase an entry ticket for 50 cents if that person had a stub from a visit to another historic site at the full price. As a result, it is not entirely clear just what the current entry fee was for 1985 and these responses were not included in the table.

Another 42 respondents merely indicated that the current entry fee was reasonable, but there is some uncertainty whether they meant the regular \$2.00 fee or a special \$.50 fee per visit to state historic sites after the full fee was paid once. This discount was in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of New Hampshire state parks. No significant difference between residents and nonresidents was found at the 0.05 level.

Conclusions

Despite the substantial loss in attendance at New Hampshire historic sites from 1964 to the present (during a time when participation in most leisuretime activities have increased substantially), an overwhelming majority of the respondents to the questionnaire viewed the quality of the specific historic sites and related services quite favorably.

While the results of the survey do not indicate that promotional activities are a dominant force governing the level of attendance at New Hampshire historic sites, there is some indication that additional promotion might increase use. Even though less than one-third of the respondents claimed that promotional activities in some form or other were responsible for their visit, it must be considered that many potential visitors may not be aware of the historic sites and what they have to offer. Since 60 percent of the visitors were aware of the historic site that they visited for a week or less, there is some indication that existing promotional activities are not reaching many potential users. In this phase of the study, no attempt was made to measure the magnitude of public wants for such areas.

While less than one in five respondents felt that the historic sites should be self-supporting, an overwhelming majority was not adverse to making some form of financial contribution. Less than 7 percent of the respondents were opposed to entry fees and 60 percent felt that a donation box to help cover costs of maintenance and improvements would be

would be appropriate. However, it is less clear if the amount of the contribution that visitors had in mind would be sufficient to defray a good portion of these costs. Over four out of five respondents felt that a reasonable entry fee was \$2.00 or less. It probably would have been better to calculate what the Division of Parks and Recreation considered an adequate entry fee and ask the respondents if it would have deterred their visit. Hopefully, this approach might be considered in a later phase of the study.

While the survey provides some useful insights from the user perspective into quality perceptions and funding preferences for publicly owned historic sites in New Hampshire, additional information is needed relative to perceived quality, valuation, and appropriate funding sources. Not only should those who currently use such resources be considered but also those who desire to preserve and maintain such areas for future use or to satisfy a more broadly defined general good. It remains the task of subsequent phases of this study to delve more deeply into the valuation of unique resources being maintained in the public trust.

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